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## Michael Markwith Reminiscences On Working for Richard Abel & Co.

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# Interview with Michael Markwith:

## Reminiscences On Working For Richard Abel & Co.

by Dora Biblarz (Arizona State University) <biblarz@asu.edu>

*Editor's Note: Dora Biblarz is continuing on her historical journey through Richard Abel and his company. Earlier issues of ATG have carried Dora's interview with Richard himself (see ATG vol.4 #3 June 1992, pg. 24ff and vol.4 #4 September 1992, pg. 20ff and vol.4 #5 November 1992, pg. 35ff) and Fred Gullette, one of Dick's partners (see ATG vol.3 #1 February 1991, pg. 28ff and vol.3 #2 April 1991, pg. 16ff). As a person who came into Acquisitions several years after the demise of Abel, I remember ubiquitous references to The Abel Company and am fascinated to hear about history firsthand from the people who were there. I know you will be too.* — KS

The amazing changes that we are currently experiencing as a result of the "electronic revolution" bring back some of the anxieties and concerns we felt during an earlier era of rapid change — the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is precisely the era during which **Richard Abel and Company** affected our academic library lives the most. People who were around during those days remind us that many of the innovations we take for granted today, e.g., technical services functions outsourced to book vendors, are just refinements of ideas that Richard Abel thought of back almost 30 years ago. One of the participants and witnesses to this period of our history is **Mike Markwith**, currently Chief Executive Officer, **Swets & Zeitlinger, Inc.** <www.swets.nl> but who started "in the business" at **Richard Abel & Co.**, and was working for **Faxon** at the time of this interview. — DB

**ATG:** When did you start to work for Richard Abel?

**MM:** I never thought I'd be recounting my early days in the business! I started working for Richard Abel in January of 1968, but my affiliation started back in 1966. I was a senior in college, working as a study hall proctor at a private high school in Portland, and the secretary to the president of the school was a woman named Betty Holman. Betty used to work late, and the nights that I worked the study hall, a couple of nights a week, we would go out and have a few beers together. After six months she left to take a job with an old college friend (who turned out to be Dick Abel).

I then went on and graduated from college, went down to San Francisco to Graduate



School, at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley and needed a job. I had a friend who was working, he said, for this bookseller who had told him "I could hire a couple more people." I said "that's great. So what do I do?" He said "come interview next week". This was like in early December. So I went down to the Sausalito office, wearing a coat and tie, everything, thinking that this was a fancy operation. It wasn't that — it was an old blimp warehouse in Sausalito, the Industrial Center Building, **Aaron Saady** was running the place and **Lillian Klein** was his assistant. Aaron took one look at me and said, "What are you here for?" "I'm here to interview for this job," I said. "Dressed like that? Didn't anyone tell you what we do here?" It was a warehouse. And I said, "No, he just told me it was a book company, or something like that. I don't even know what the name of the company is."

Aaron says, "Never mind, never mind. Let me ask you some questions. What languages do you have?" I said "Greek, Hebrew, and Latin." He said "you're hired. We need more bodies. We've got approval books to fill. Can you type?" "Yea, I can type 60 words a minute" "Good, you can do billing when you have to." And he went on — and I said "What's the name of this company?" He says, "It's the Richard Abel Company." "Richard Abel? You're not headquartered in Portland, are you?" "Yea, how do you know?" "Isn't this the place where Betty Holman works?" "You know Betty?" I said, "Yea." He said "you just got a raise!"

This story tells you a lot about the company. And that was Aaron Saady. I got started working 4 hours a day. My first job was \$1.50 per hour opening approval returns. I did ap-

proval returns, I did approval stock — we had one guy who ran the approval plan, but my job was to put the stock up, pull the orders, then take any returns, put them back on the shelf, get the credits right, and so forth. I did that for a year and a half.

**ATG:** How much business did you do in Sausalito at that time?

**MM:** We had all the major libraries like Stanford, Berkeley, and UCLA. We covered Nevada out of San Francisco, went down as far as Fresno. I remember all those great codes, and part of the fun of working there was to sort out the codes. I worked for Aaron. I got my pay all the way from \$1.50 to two bucks an hour by the time I left. I went back to Portland after two years of graduate school and Aaron suggested that I get on the management trainee program so I went and interviewed with Dick, and Dick put me on this program. I had no idea what to ask for, so I asked for \$2.25 an hour, thinking that was great. But he said "Actually I was thinking of starting you out at a salary of...." I don't remember what it was, I think it was \$500 a month. I said, "Ooohhh, wow" After an hourly wage, it was just fantastic.

**ATG:** What is the "management trainee program"? This is the first time I've heard of this.

**MM:** This was interesting because this is where Dick had 3 or 4 people at one time that he was basically sort of grooming, and I was one of them. The idea was to spend the first six months going around, learning more of the nuts and bolts of the business. I was doing some pricing of the books and learning the economics of the business and so forth. It was now 1969 and he was starting to automate the approval plan. **Don Stave**, with Dick, was putting together the thesaurus, and starting the profiling. They were starting to centralize the processes. And there was a guy named **Dan Eaves**, who was in Portland and had been the head of the buying operation. He was sent out East to Boston, to open the Boston office.

I was pulled off the trainee program to run the advance information. I was the manager of AIP, the Advanced Information Program. That meant that I was responsible for ordering the books, for the coverage. I worked very closely with **Lyman Newlin** and very closely with Dick. I was in charge of people who essentially did preorder searching and copy cataloging. That was part of the thing, too, that I

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was "being groomed for management", so I supervised a guy, twice my age, and ten times the professional experience I had, but Joe didn't want anything to do with management. So I'm managing him at 24 or 25 years old, or whatever I was. It should have been the other way around.

**ATG:** Did you by then give up your other career?

**MM:** Well, not at first, I didn't. What happened after about a year is that my time sort of got sucked in by Abel and the church work got further and further behind. I ended up doing a different type of "missionary work". Dick used to say what he really liked about the people that were most enthusiastic was their missionary zeal. And he felt, we're not selling widgets, we're not selling arms of destruction, we're not even selling things that make your life better — we're selling information, and Dick was seriously committed to that. Some folks get cynical about it, but in reality it was not very difficult for me to justify it, making that shift, saying "no, no, this is great" because I don't have to deal with little old ladies. I don't have other people telling me I can't dress this way, and I can't do that, which the church was always very big on. I could be involved in the renaissance of education.

There were times, at night, when we would have — not arguments, but long discussions. Don Stave, Dick and I, just the three of us, many a night we were the only ones there. Don was pouring over the approval books, and I was trying to catch up on everything because Dick wanted to really cover the world, I think that came out in your second interview [with **Fred Gullette**, *ATG*, vol.3 #1 February 1991, pg. 28 ff and vol.3 #2 April 1991, pg 16ff ]. I found a memo that I once wrote saying, "we've got to simplify the approval plan." It made business sense, but on the other hand, the goal, the zeal, was to cover everything. You know from a collection development point of view, people ask: "Where's your focus? Where's your focus? You can't cover the world." Dick replied, "Yes we can. And I've got this kid out here who's going to make sure we've got these things ordered." And then he would turn to me and say, "Have you ordered this? Do you have this contact here in Nairobi?" And so forth. It was really a lot of fun.

**ATG:** So you came into the company at a point of maturity: it was past the trauma of the Reed College Bookstore, and the initial growth spurt after Dick established "Richard Abel & Co." It had which branches by then?

**MM:** By the time I joined, there was Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver — **Jim Cameron** had opened Denver — Zion, Illinois,

Arlington, Texas, and Blackwood had opened. After I was there about a year, they opened Boston and Marion, Ohio. **Tom Slatner** and **Bernard Starkman** opened offices in Amsterdam and London. I remember one time having a conversation with Aaron that the company did \$4 million in business the year I joined, or something like that, which was 67-68, and was in the neighborhood of the upper 30s, low 40s when it went under in 1975. And most of that growth took place before 72-73. We were adding approval plans like crazy. When I started in advanced information, we were buying around 40 copies of a title, by the end of the two years I spent there, we were up to buying 120 copies of a title.

**ATG:** So how many employees were there at the time you joined?

**MM:** In Portland at the time I joined there were at least 100. My guess is there had to be, because we were in 3 buildings. One building was solely devoted to doing the processing for those opening day collections and that's what **Kent Hendrickson** came in to do; Kent came just about the same time I did. Then we had a small computer room.

By 1970 or 71, when we moved out to the new building, I remember 300-350 people moving into that building. Yeah, it grew like

**"Dick [Abel] really pioneered and created great expectations."**

topsy. It went from having one of Dick's lieutenants who handled personnel decisions, to actually spiraling up to a full time human resources person, in that short time. A lot of growth, a lot of change, a lot of rapid change, high tech being what it is!

**ATG:** So your job assignment changed when you became head of AIP. Then, how did you progress in the company?

**MM:** That was quite a period; in a year and a half, about five years' worth of changes took place. We went from the manual approval plan to having the computer, if you will, run the profile; the information pre-profiled from the book, which gave guidance to the buyer about how many copies to buy. We also went from buying for all ten offices by now, to only buying for the three regional offices — in Zion, Illinois, Blackwood, and Portland. This was a time of tremendous change in peoples' responsibilities, having real problems with people who'd been there since day one but who couldn't adjust to the new computerized world.

**ATG:** That sounds familiar.

**MM:** That's right, it's all deja vu today. My responsibilities sort of grew. I took over

not only making sure that we had all the information for advance information, but all the ordering, so I ended up working very closely with all the approval plan people, the approval profilers. Standing orders had to be brought in because they had to always be matched to be sure that there was no duplication.

**ATG:** That was the bane of your existence.

**MM:** That's right, it still is, of every bookseller's existence, of every serials agent's existence. Dealing with those unruly titles, standing orders, serials, monographs in parts, and so forth. I worked with the programmers in terms of developing an automated in-process file, an acquisitions system, if you will. I started out as the order clerk initially, then became the acquisitions librarian, developed a system, which then grew to where the whole thing demanded a higher level of management in Dick's mind. At that point, he asked me to go into sales, and **Don Chvatal** basically took over the management of that acquisitions program. And **Oliver Sitea** came up to Portland. Oliver took over my job, with a lot more responsibility, because he was far more experienced than I.

My next training program was to go into sales. Dick wanted me to go out and get some experience in libraries before I came back to an undefined position in management. After the approval plan was fully automated, the new profiling and the thesaurus came along, it was always referred to as a computerized approval plan, depending on who you talked to, in Abel or out of Abel. When all that was finally done, Dick said to go to New Jersey and travel in the East. To spend, he said, a year or two traveling, calling on the libraries there, just calling on the large approval accounts. So I was the "approval expert" because I had been in the home office. Most of the big approval plans were out in the East. The ones that were still in the West had long contact with Portland and people there who could see that they had whatever they needed.

**ATG:** And by the time you went East, it was centralized into the three offices?

**MM:** That's right, basically they started closing some of the branch offices and especially closed a lot of the direct contact in approval plan decision making. Centralized it, as Dick said, so that decisions were uniform throughout, looking for economies of scale, looking for ways to deal with the recession. Tremendous overheads running, in essence, ten approval plans and everything up here in people's minds.

**ATG:** I'm sure that inconsistencies were bound to appear as people went from one library job to another, when they compared  
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*the plan with the one they just left. It made a lot of business sense to make these changes.*

**MM:** Oh, yes, no question about it. But it was all happening at the same time that the plan was growing, that Dick was opening new branches, that business was growing. More books were published and libraries had money, it was all like a big mushroom — growing all at once. And happening at different levels.

**ATG:** *Was this around the time that many librarians were resisting and reacting against the approval plan philosophically?*

**MM:** There was a fight, a “sub-fight” going on in the community — approval plans, or not. People were saying, “I’m not going to let a bookseller make all my decisions for me, abdicating my responsibilities as a librarian.” We had to overcome those objections. But the year that I sold actively for Abel and the later years that I sold for BNAm, it became clear to me that the profiles became the de facto collection development policy. Libraries back then in the late 60s, early 70s didn’t take the time to write collection development policies, didn’t have time. I used to talk with people and tell them, “The profile should be ....” For some libraries I used to write the prose for what the profile said because otherwise it was pages and pages of computer gibberish. In some cases this would become the nucleus of the written policy.

**ATG:** *Let’s turn now to the financial situation. You said the volume had gone from \$3-4 million early on, in 67-68, to the high \$30s by 1975.*

**MM:** That’s my recollection. What’s really interesting is that at the same time that the growth and expansion was going on, money was getting really tight. There was a recession in 1972; the recession burst and hit again in 73 to where gas went to a dollar and all that. Rapid growth, money from the banks, credit lines, and some stories (I always thought they were true) about how Dick wanted to go public. Given all this, the only way to stay viable and make money was to go public. In order to go public he had to show better profit margins for the banks, which meant the bean counters came in and took control, saying, “You can’t do this, you can’t do that, you’ve got to do it this way, you’ve got to do it that way.” That was unpleasant.

People got nervous with the recession; guys who were handling the accounts payables were trying to slide things as long as they could in order to keep the money, which is what accountants are paid to do. Lyman’s job was to convince the publishers we weren’t going bankrupt, even in circumstances when the payments would fall behind. Things had grown so fast that they didn’t have the receivables to

catch up with the programs. Nobody was really pressuring libraries to pay, yet there was this gap — the float was in there. There were some internal business practices that needed to be cleaned up and they just weren’t cleaned up soon enough. I think another month, another month and a half, and the company would have never gone bankrupt.

**ATG:** *This is the only business where you pay your creditors in advance, but the receivables might take 60, 90 days, or longer to come in!*

**MM:** That’s exactly right. It makes no sense, yet that’s exactly the way it was. That’s why you have to make policies about prepayment, like in subscriptions, then give benefits in terms of discount. I can remember quite honestly that during these times it was not pleasant; it had become unpleasant to work. Everything had to be documented, every cost. The panic that was starting to get in, the unionization, all these fights. It had become a much different working environment.

**ATG:** *You said that you left a year and a half before the end, but you experienced it from the “other side” — how did that happen?*

**MM:** I wasn’t really happy living in the East and after I spent one year at it, I asked Dick when I would be able to return to Portland. He said, “I don’t know quite what we’re going to do, talk to me about it later.” About the same time the State University of New York at Binghamton asked me to interview for the job of head of Acquisitions and I agreed. I stayed there for four years and during that time I found myself having to defend keeping our Abel approval plan to the faculty and administration, at the same time hearing stories that things were going bad. At some point, about four months before they went out, I could no longer get the assurances and we weren’t getting the books. I had to switch approval plans in order to serve the client I was working for at the time, the faculty at Binghamton.

That was awful, really awful. There’s a lot of guilt that went with that, no question about it. I maintained close friendships with most all the people involved. I really admire people who were able to live through that, through the times without money. There was all that trust in Abel, so that today people are still saying, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket....” This seems to be the biggest lesson the library community came away with.

**ATG:** *The other thing is the standard for certain services to libraries was set by the company 25 or 30 years ago.*

**MM:** No question about it. I’ll argue that with anyone under the sun. Dick really pioneered and created great expectations. That’s why I have to tell you that I’m glad there’s a

renaissance and understanding 20 years later, because it probably took that long for people to get over it.

**ATG:** *Okay, let’s make the transition to your years at BNAm. Here you are, four years after quitting the Abel Co., and having passed through the perspective of the “other side” as it were. Now you’re back on the vendor side. What impact did you observe Abel having on BNAm?*

**MM:** It was fantastic. It was everything that Dick wanted to do with the funding of the Blackwells that made it possible. It was wonderful, glorious. I personally got to know the Blackwells when I was at SUNY, so after they purchased, it was great to have friends — fairly good friendships with Miles and his father, Richard. To have them be a part of it and then be able to come back and work for them was really neat at the time. Also, putting together the approval plan; within BNAm, it took a long time for the English and American plans to talk, it was like the early 80s, it might have been 82 or 83 before that really happened, even though the idea had been around. In that sense, it was like the continuation of all that had gone on. I’m not sure that everyone believed it at the time; I’m sure there were still a lot of ill feelings about Abel going out of business. But I could see that it was an excellent, logical extension of what Abel had done. Besides, they brought all the people along: **Oliver Sitea, Don Stave, Don Satisky, and Kent Hendrickson** (until he returned to library land).

**ATG:** *It seems like the name, BNAm, is the only thing that’s different in a lot of ways.*

**MM:** In many ways, that’s true. The basic ideas are the same, and what the Blackwells did was keep the dream alive, if you will, for those of us who were around early on. That was really good.

**ATG:** *The one concept that stands out in the interviews I’ve been doing is the view of Dick as a man with a vision, not motivated by greed or ego, except the ego for success, but who wanted to put the knowledge, the content of knowledge in everyone’s hand, a very democratic concept.*

**MM:** And somehow it became contagious, because those of us that were there basically shared that same vision or we wouldn’t have been there. I really don’t think that’s corny; it’s part of what was so neat. But in terms of how that affected me professionally — the demise, and personally the demise was devastating — it meant that these values would never materialize, but those are values that you don’t lose, as a person. The people who were involved back then still operate, wherever they are in their businesses, with that same value structure, and the more I see it, the more I realize that’s a real positive result. 